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Downey Is Shaping a Role in Arms Control

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WASHINGTON, March 15 — Three years ago, Thomas J. Downey nervously took his seat in the House of Representatives. At 25, he was the youngest member of the new Congress and eagerly sought an assignment on one of the influential committees.

"I wanted Ways and Means or Appropriations or the Rules Committee," said the Congressman from New York's Second District. "I couldn't get on them because I had no seniority. So I was named to a vacant Democratic seat on the Armed Services Committee. I had no military experience, no military background. I knew very little about the military. But I thought it would be interesting to learn. I've learned a lot."

Within the last few years Mr. Downey has emerged as the most articulate liberal voice on the powerful committee, as an arms control specialist and as a controversial, if somewhat iconoclastic figure among his colleagues.

"My life," says the dapper Congressman, "is a little schizophrenic. I turn it off and on. I deal with SALT and arms control and the B-1 all week, and then I fly home to Long Island on Friday nights with my laundry and my law books and it's back to reality. I go out to the Great South Bay on Saturday, and if someone ever asked me what are the chances for a SALT accord, I'd probably fall in and drown."

Difficult for a Liberal

With defense policy and legislation often shaped in the Armed Services Committees of the House and Senate, Mr. Downey speaks candidly, and sometimes angrily, about his colleagues. He makes it plain that it is difficult to be a liberal on the committee, which traditionally has a heavy conservative tilt.

"The committee is tremendously frustrating," said the Suffolk County Congressman, as he ate a luncheon salad in the House dining room. "The

committee will listen to facts and opinions that would lead reasonable men to conclude that we need to end the arms race, yet the committee comes to the reverse conclusion and says we need to spend more on arms.

"The frustrating thing is to have the D.I.A., he said, referring to the Defense Intelligence Agency, "or Air Force intelligence give a security briefing and explain how the Russians are ahead of us, and the committee chortles with delight. But when they hear a briefing as they did the other day from Stansfield Turner, who gave a realistic assessment of where we were ahead and where we were behind, these people who would have us spend infinite amounts on arms seem almost depressed. They're depressed when they find that there are areas in which we surpass the Russians. It's an amazing situation."

Adm. Stansfield Turner is Director of Central Intelligence.

Like Mischievous Choir Boy

At hearings, Mr. Downey, who is the youngest member of the Armed Services Committee, chews gum intensely, toys with pencils and bounces restlessly in his chair. He speaks rapidly and confers in whispers with colleagues. With his youthful appearance, he resembles a slightly mischievous choir boy.

"If you're too aggressive or too ambitious, you get nothing done in this place," he says. "I'm trying to be reasonably aggressive."

Mr. Downey, a native of Ozone Park, Queens, has strongly supported the Administration's proposals to limit strategic arms—he is one of five members of the House who is an official observer at the Geneva talks—and was a vocal supporter of the Administration's plan to develop the neutron bomb, a decision that upset his liberal colleagues.

He supported the White House decision to end production of the B-1 bomber, although component parts of the plane are built in his district. How-

ever, he opposes plans to reduce sharply production of the F-14 Tomcat fighter, which is made by a constituent, the Grumman Aerospace Corporation.

He concedes the irony of being a vocal liberal on defense matters but representing constituents whose jobs are dependent on bigger defense budgets.

Doesn't Support All Projects

"I realized when I got on the committee there were going to be problems," he says. "There are projects which directly help my district which I may not be for. But there are others, like the F-14, that I fully support."

Mr. Downey, a bachelor who lives in a basement apartment near the Capitol, attends American University Law School at night. (Speaker of the House Thomas P. O'Neill Jr. was one of his sponsors.) His knowledge of military matters has grown over the last three years as a result of weekly Pentagon briefings, private sessions with ranking Pentagon officials, as well as former Defense Secretary James R. Schlesinger, and a flow of reports and documents.

"If you spend the time and ask the questions, the military is delighted to educate you, even if they know that you won't agree with them," he says. "You can receive a briefing on anything—how to destroy a dam, how the terrain guidance of the cruise missile works, how a nuclear weapon is made."

Perhaps his most frustrating moment on the committee, he says, took place during the West Point cheating scandal when he offered a compromise that was designed to keep cadets threatened with suspension in the military academy until a full report was issued. Despite Mr. Downey's plea, most of the Congressmen voted to suspend the cadets immediately.

"It was pure emotion on the part of some of my colleagues," he says evenly. "I felt like strangling them."